

Silence of the Birds and Mosquitoes

By TONY KELSO

"Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change... There was a strange stillness, the birds for example - where had they gone?... It was spring without voices." So begins Rachel Carson's groundbreaking book, *Silent Spring*, about the effects of pesticides on the natural world.

It is worth reflecting during our current fears about the EEE virus in Duxbury that the impetus for this book and this vision was the effect of spraying for mosquitoes right here in Duxbury.

In the summer of 1957, Duxbury, like many coastal South Shore towns, blanketed the town with aerial spraying for mosquitoes. Olga Owens Huckins, who lived on Powder Point, was a friend of Rachel Carson and wrote her the following January about what they witnessed:

"The mosquito control plane flew over our small town last summer. Since we live close to the marshes we were treated to several lethal doses, as the pilot criss-crossed over our place... We consider the spraying of active poi-

son over private land to be a serious aerial intrusion.

"The 'harmless' shower bath killed seven of our lovely songbirds outright.

We picked up the

three dead bodies the next morning right by the door.... The next day three were scattered around the bird bath.

We were too heartsick to hunt for other corpses. All of these birds died horribly, and in the same way. Their bills gaping open and their splayed claws were drawn up top their breasts in agony."

Olga and her husband, Stuart Huckins, were outraged by this destruction and wrote both the *Boston Herald* and their friend, Rachel Carson in turn had been considering doing a series of articles about the uses of DDT and other lethal pesticides, but after the letter from her friends decided a book was in order.

The town of Duxbury got serious about its mosquito population in 1931 when it voted \$2,000 to be paid to a state agency for the "eradication" of mosquitoes. This was a large sum of money to be spent by a poor town in the depths of the Depression. Longtime residents of Duxbury will tell you tales of mosquitoes the size of horses in the 1920s. With its abundant marshes, swamps, and low wet spots, the town was a prime breeding ground for mosquitoes and the illnesses they engender.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s yearly money was voted for mosquito control. This must have been spraying from trucks because it was not until 1949 that the town voted more money to expand the program "by spraying certain areas by airplane." As a byproduct of World War II, marvelous new toxic pesticides

such as DDT had come on the market but were touted as being completely "harmless."

In 1953 Duxbury selectmen wrote in the annual town report that mosquito control was "an accepted and expected feature of our community life" but that they were displeased with the results that year and vowed there would be a better plan.

The better plan of 1954 included voting \$5,500 to join the South Shore Mosquito Control Project, which resulted in

increased aerial and ground spraying and continued ditching of marsh areas including reclaiming many old ditches. This type of control continued through the 1950s. In one year the report mentions laying down a "wall of DDT" that would stop mosquitoes and army worms.

In the summer of 1957 that the Huckinses witnessed mass destruction of birdlife in their backyard at 287 Powder Point Avenue, 2,400 acres of Duxbury were aerial sprayed, and in the winter DDT dust was laid down on frozen ponds and swamps in town.

It is perhaps ironic to note in light of what happened, that the summers of 1957 and 1958 were very dry, so few mosquitoes were seen, and more importantly no EEE cases were found in Massachusetts.

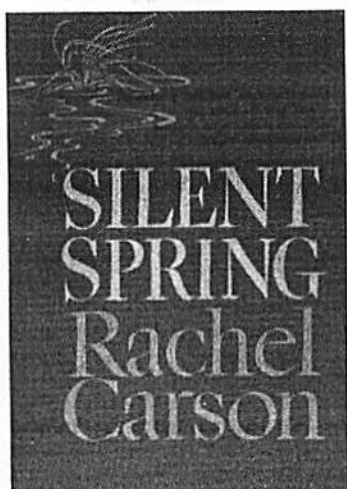
Silent Spring was published in 1962 and the resulting firestorm of concern and publicity about the dangerousness of insecticides was immediate and nationwide within the year. It is interesting to note that the report of mosquito control in the Town Report of 1963 does not mention mosquito control at all; when previously there had been several pages, it only reported about greenhead fly control. Silence wasn't only for wildlife apparently.

Finally, by 1968 the Duxbury report began to mention

that there are new chemicals and methods allowing for controlling mosquitoes "without damaging, contaminating or unbalancing other members of the natural environment." Some 37 years later, although we are still threatened with EEE, the pesticides used to lessen the danger from mosquitoes are less harmful to Duxbury's landscape and wildlife.

So, although we may picture 1950s Duxbury as a ground zero fog of pesticides and dead birds and wildlife in the name of mosquito control, we have Duxbury residents Olga and Stuart Huckins, and especially Rachel Carson, to thank for the world coming closer to her vision that opens *Silent Spring*:

"There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings."



Rachel Carson